

## Interacting with Arabs and Muslims

By Joe Navarro, M.A.

**T**he terrible events of September 11, 2001, focused all of America, in fact, the world, on the Middle East, the various Arab conflicts, and Islam. For the most part, law enforcement has had little contact with the growing Arab/Muslim community because they are law-abiding, hardworking, family-oriented people seeking the same freedoms and aspirations as other immigrant groups before them. Law enforcement contact with these communities principally has been in administrative areas, such as with the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service or the U.S. Customs Service.

The World Trade Center bombing in 1993 and the events of September 11, 2001, have changed the American perception of the Arab/Muslim community in the United States. These terrorist acts, perpetrated by a few individuals who do not represent the millions of law-abiding Muslims and Arab-Americans living in the United States, brought focus upon an otherwise quiescent Arab/Muslim community. Consequently, interactions between law enforcement and the Arab/Muslim community in the United States increased precipitously. To do their jobs effectively, law enforcement officers must understand more about the Arab culture to better interact with this community.<sup>1</sup>

### The Arab Perspective

Twenty countries encompass the "Arab world." While political diversity among the Arab countries is notable (governmental systems include monarchies, military governments, and socialist republics), they all strongly embrace Islam.<sup>2</sup> Although vast social differences exist between the various cultures from the Arab world, Arabs are more homogeneous than Westerners in their outlook on life. Most Arabs share basic beliefs and values that cross national or social class boundaries. For example, Islam possibly can influence personal beliefs even among non-Muslims

living in the Arab world; child-rearing practices are nearly identical; and the family structure is essentially the same, with a high regard for tradition.<sup>3</sup>

Similar to other cultures, ethnic identity remains very important for Arabs, regardless of whether they share the same religion. Their ethnicity and cultural background, their native city and country, and where they have traveled are very important to them.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, their dignity, honor, and reputation are of paramount importance, and they spare no effort to protect them. Arabs tend to behave in a way that will create a good impression on others.<sup>5</sup> Loyalty to one's family takes precedence over personal needs. Social class and family background constitute the major determining factors of personal status, followed by individual character and achievement. As with other cultures, Arabs place great importance on education and learning; many educated people of the Arab world speak several languages, including French and English, in addition to their native tongues.

Religion also plays a large part in Arab culture. While Islam is the primary religion, the Arab world consists of Christians and Jews, as well as Bahais, Alaouis, and Zoroastrians. Nevertheless, in this region of the world, God or Allah, plays a vital role, and

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almost everyone acknowledges his power and has some sort of religious affiliation. Muslims tend to believe that humans cannot control all events; some things depend on God (i.e., fate). Religious piety constitutes one of the most admirable characteristics in a person and, unlike most Western governments, a large number of Muslims believe that there should be no separation between “church and state,” the secular and the religious. They believe that religion should be taught in schools and promoted by governments because Islam encompasses the social, as well as the spiritual.<sup>6</sup>

Similar to other cultures, Arabs are generous, humanitarian, polite, and loyal people with a rich cultural heritage dating back thousands of years, as illustrated by their contributions to religion, philosophy, literature, medicine, architecture, art, mathematics, and the natural sciences.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, many Arabs feel that Westerners have misunderstood and wrongly characterized them; they often feel neglected, ignored, or even exploited. For many Arabs, the experience of the Palestinians represents the most painful and obvious example of Western indifference or arrogance. Many Arabs view the creation of Israel as the capricious imposition of a Jewish state, by the West, at the expense of the Palestinian people, causing their migration (or as they term, diaspora) throughout the Middle East.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, many Arabs perceive Westerners as culturally hegemonous, with the propensity to weaken traditional family ties, as well as social and religious values, a potentially corrupting influence on traditional Arab society.<sup>9</sup>

The male-female relationship for many Arabs remains an important issue in the Middle East. For Arab men, especially those from very traditional backgrounds, discussing business with a woman present may make them ill at ease. At the same time, an Arab woman’s tradition may inhibit her from discussing matters with men who are not family members. Even something like shaking hands with

a person of the opposite sex is viewed negatively by some Arabs (mostly extremists) unless body language implies otherwise. Some believe that if an Arab woman offers to shake hands, it is permissible, but a man never should extend his hand to a veiled woman. Some Muslim men (mostly extremists) will not shake a female’s hand unless she is part of his family.<sup>10</sup>

### Law Enforcement Perspective

As with all cultures, the law enforcement approach to Arab-Americans should remain one of respect and dignity, with an appreciation for their historical, cultural, and life experiences. Many come from countries that have seen decades of war (Lebanon) or where capricious regimes have expelled them, which happened to many Palestinians after the Gulf

War. Their perceptions of law enforcement often are tainted by these events and how they were treated overseas. For many Arab-Americans, a lingering fear exists that they are perceived as terrorists because they are Muslims, from the Middle East, or the fact that they dress differently.<sup>11</sup>

Law enforcement officers need the assistance and cooperation of this vital community. Agencies can develop and encourage greater trust and cooperation between the Arab/Muslim commu-

nity and local, state, and federal law enforcement. As with most immigrant groups, Arab communities want to eliminate crime in their neighborhoods, they want to feel safe, they want their children to thrive, and they do not want to be associated with terrorism.

In general, the Arab community willingly assists in investigations. They respond to well-mannered, professional investigators. Oftentimes, they make their homes a comfortable place to conduct interviews by offering tea or coffee and even generous amounts of food. This represents their way of showing hospitality and congeniality. In fact, partaking of refreshments often leads to more open and extended conversations, which, in turn, may prove beneficial to both the Arab and law enforcement communities. Such

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situations may require more time and patience because Arabs usually prefer not to “talk business” right away, but engage in friendly conversations first.

To this end, officers should avoid contacting Arab/Muslims on religious holidays or during prayers (devout Muslims pray five times per day and weekly communal prayer is at noon on Fridays).<sup>12</sup> Very little eye contact should occur between male law enforcement officers and Arab females. For example, the head of an Arab family scolded officers because they repeatedly visually scanned the man’s daughters as they entered the room. Law enforcement officers should refer to the family in the collective, not individually, because for many Arabs, the family constitutes a very private matter, with daughters and wives receiving special considerations.

While in Arab/Muslim homes, law enforcement officers should be respectful of the family hierarchy.

They should avoid slouching in chairs or, in particular, baring the soles of their shoes to their hosts. This may not seem important to Westerners, but it is very important to many Arabs.

Similarly, shame often becomes a bigger factor than guilt. When possible, officers should conduct interviews in private, allowing for the person to save face if caught in a lie. Investigators can question inconsistencies, but they must offer the interviewee room to maneuver and save face so that they are not shamed into not further responding or having to lie in front of others.

### Conclusion

Law enforcement officers should remain sensitive to various ethnic groups. They can influence and shape perceptions by professional comportment. Interviewees often willingly tell officers about their backgrounds and their lives. This information can

### Additional Resources

- Roger E. Axtell, *Gestures: The Do’s and Taboos of Body Language Around The World* (New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1991).
- Daniel C. Diller and John L. Moore, eds., *The Middle East* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1994).
- Elizabeth W. Fernea, *Guests of The Sheik: An Ethnography Of An Iraqi Village* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 1965).
- Bernard Lewis, *The Middle East: A Brief History of The Last 2,000 Years* (New York, NY: Scribner, 1995).
- Desmond Morris, *Bodytalk: The Meaning of Human Gestures* (New York, NY: Crown Trade Paperbacks, 1994) and *Man Watching* (New York, NY: Crown Publishers, 1980).
- Desmond Morris, et. al., *Gestures* (New York, NY: Scarborough Book, 1995).
- Terri Morrison, Wayne A. Conaway, and George A. Borden, *Kiss, Bow, or Shake Hands: How to Do Business in Sixty Countries* (Holbrook, MA: Adams Media Corporation, 1994).
- Charles D. Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1996).
- William Spencer, ed., *Global Studies: The Middle East* (Guilford, CT: Dushkin Publishing Group/Brown & Benchmark Publishers, 1996).

prove educational and enriching, enhance communication, establish empathetic channels, and prepare officers for the next interview where knowledge of the region and customs oftentimes can offer additional investigative opportunities and improve relations between the law enforcement agency and the cultural group.

As terrorism investigations continue, officers involved in these types of investigations should receive additional training or read relative literature to enhance their abilities to deal with this growing community. They will enrich their understanding of a diverse and interesting people, though often misunderstood. The Arab community deserves law enforcement's best efforts and protection, which can be accomplished ably with understanding, dignity, and respect. ♦

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The author based this article on his years of analyzing the effects of culture on human behavior and personal experience as an investigator.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret K. Nydell, *Understanding Arabs: A Guide for Westerners* (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, Inc., 1996), 20.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 12, 20.

<sup>4</sup> Fouad Ghorra, *The Arab World* (unpublished manuscript), (Tampa FL).

<sup>5</sup> *Supra* note 2, 21.

<sup>6</sup> *Supra* note 2, 19.

<sup>7</sup> *Supra* note 2, 22.

<sup>8</sup> Roy R. Anderson, Robert F. Selbert, and Jon G. Wagner, *Politics and Change in the Middle East: Sources of Conflict and Accommodation*, 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Simon and Schuster, 1993).

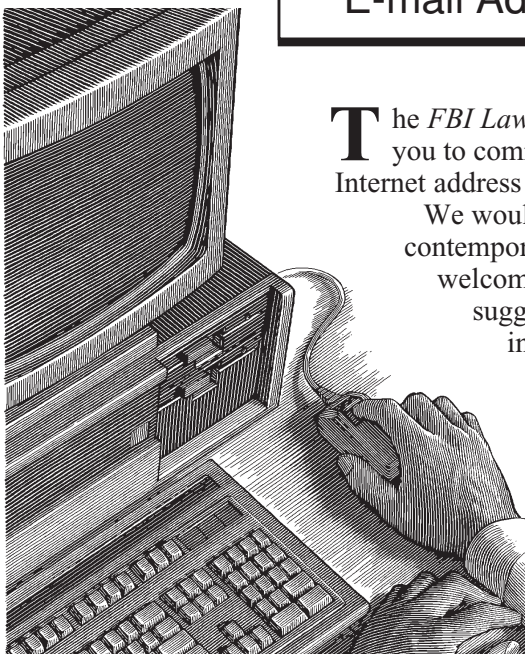
<sup>9</sup> *Supra* note 2, 22.

<sup>10</sup> *Supra* note 4.

<sup>11</sup> *Supra* note 2, 24.

<sup>12</sup> John Sabini, *Islam: A Primer*, revised ed. (Washington, DC: Middle East Editorial Associates, 1990), 16.

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